

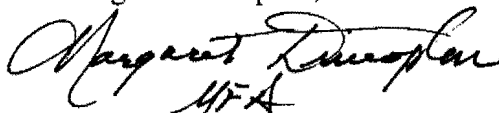
The Night Train

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Margaret Dimoplon" with "MFA" written below it in a smaller, more stylized script.

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I am grateful to have had the opportunity to write this paper. It was a way for me to collect my memories and share them with others. In writing it, I had the chance to relive the time I spent overseas; however, in doing so, it made me miss my time in Australia even more.

Prologue

The sun would be rising soon. The clouds already held that soft pink glow that served as a primer for the thick oranges and sharp pinks that would be spilling through the dim sky. It was dark in the back of the plane. Twelve hours over the Pacific Ocean at night. In those twelve hours the worlds below seemed to disappear; no sign of life came from the deep waters, no glimmer of lights, no evidence of civilization. Only the black of night filled the windows. For those twelve hours it felt as if the world was contained within the belly of that plane.

It was Sunday, April 25th for the second time around. We had crossed the International Dateline since our plane had left the lush green coast of New Zealand. In a few hours we would be landing on American soil in Los Angeles, California. It had been over three months since I had seen America.

The tray was pulled down from the seat in front of me. On it my journal was spread open to a random day. March 16, 2004 was written in black ink across the top. I had been flipping through the pages, reliving the days I had spent in Australia. Every page seemed to contain an adventure or a new experience, memories I wanted to hold on to for the years to come.

I had gone overseas with 30 other college students. The day we set off on this once-in-a-lifetime experience we were all nervous about what awaited, but simultaneously we were all excited to spend our days on the beaches of New South Wales while studying with Australian professors. We lived on a sports camp in Lennox

Head, NSW. We attended classes during the week, but most of our hours were free for exploring. Many afternoons were spent soaking up the Australian sun. The studying alone was a unique experience. However, I think it was in the traveling that we really learned. The classes were set up to give us three-day weekends so we could explore Australia, and explore we did. We spent those weekends traveling to places like Sydney, Canberra, Cairns, and the Gold Coast. Three of us even made it all the way down to Melbourne, 24 hours one way from where we were staying. It was through these trips that we really discovered Australia. It was through these trips that we learned more about ourselves.

I glanced down at my journal. March 16, that was the night we set out on our first trip to Sydney. It was also our first run-in with the night train. Since our daylight hours were limited we had decided to travel at night. I had no idea going into it that the night train would be an experience all its own. Stepping into the night train was like stepping into another world.

Sleeping Hair

Outside, people waited. They lured around benches burdened by carpet bags, suitcases, and the weight of worldly possessions too important to leave at home. A cool wind blew, feet shuffled on the concrete. The small ones slept in their mothers' laps. One boy stood alone, stood on the other side of the line. Everyone was watching, waiting for the light to come through the darkness. Large bats flew overhead, their wings outstretched as if to shield the earth from the light of the moon, their forms creating dark shadows as they called to one another excited by the scent of the newly bloomed flowers.

Soon, the light broke through the darkness. A yellow, round ball of steady light announced the arrival of the train. It slowed among the people, breathing life into the sleeping crowd. Everyone stirred, grabbing for luggage. The loud, mechanical sound of iron drowned out the voices, drowned out thought.

Sarah, one of my traveling companions, motioned at us with wide swooping arms indicating we had been waiting in the wrong square. Everyone scrambled as the train slowed. No one wanted to be left behind. My roommate, Carrie and I grabbed our belongings as we too, hurried to join Sarah.

The train stopped momentarily, long enough for the passengers to match the car indicated on their tickets to the large black letters posted at the doors of the train. The three of us looked at one another and took a deep breath as our conductor stepped onto the platform and invited us inside.

“You’re the one that’s done this before.” I looked at Sarah. “After you.” We followed Sarah into the darkness. As we stepped onto the train, the doors behind us closed and the lights and hustle of the world fell behind us. Inside the closed box of the train car, even the air felt different. Unlike the night air we had just left, inside, it was a sleepy dark. It took a minute for our eyes to adjust to the scarce light. Soon we were able to navigate by the glow of the blue emergency lights that lined the aisle. Our bags were heavy. Mine barely fit through the aisle as I squeezed it through the rows of seats, struggling to lift it over the heads and feet of sleeping passengers. A small boy called out to his mother, confused after waking up on the floor.

I looked down at the orange ticket I held in my hand, 34 B, and up again at the strips under the luggage rack. Great, my seat I thought as I glanced at the sandy burnet head resting comfortably in my assigned seat. The hair was stringy and in need of washing. I looked at the woman laying there. Was she Australian? Everything about her felt foreign. Her hair became an object in my seat, my territory. Yet it was her country I was visiting; her land at which I found myself gawking in wonder. Maybe I was the one overstepping my boundaries. She slept on unaware of my presence. I stuffed my bag in the space reserved for my feet, hoping that the movement and noise would wake the sleeping hair. It worked. The hair fanned out in my seat pulled away like an animal retreating to its den as she sat up confused, looking for the source of the noise. I suddenly felt that I was the intruder. Intruding in a foreign land, in a foreign culture, and on a foreign person.

“I’m sorry love, is this your seat?” Her voice was still heavy with sleep as she sat upright.

I smiled and nodded. "It's okay." I felt guilty for waking her. The woman looked like she had been traveling for awhile. She wore a pair of purple stretch leggings, the type that are normally skin-tight. These, however, hung baggily from her small compact body. Her shirt also slipped from her shoulders. Both looked old, like hand-me-downs. This woman, maybe in her late thirties, settled back down into her seat, her hair resting against the window. I sat uncomfortably not wanting to disturb her further as the temperature in the car continued to drop.

It wasn't too long before I felt a tap on my shoulder. "It's so cold," Carrie said her arms wrapped around her attempting to preserve body heat. "I knew I should have brought a sweatshirt."

"I have an extra long sleeve shirt if you would like to borrow it. I wanted to get my sweatshirt out anyway."

"Are you sure you don't need it?"

"No I'll be fine. You can have it." I pulled the bag out from its hiding place and unzipped it. The lady stirred, and I cringed. "Here," I whispered as I handed Carrie the wadded t-shirt.

She mouthed a thank you as she took the shirt and returned to her seat five rows in front of me. I watched jealously as she sprawled out in the empty seat next to her own. Carrie and I lived next door to one another in the dorms back home. Both of us being psychology majors, we had become friends. Studying abroad had ultimately been her decision. Sure I was the one who had shown her the brochures, but she was the one brave enough to turn in her check, reserving her spot in Australia; I just followed suit. Sarah was a friend we had made on the trip who quickly became a traveling buddy. The

stranger sleeping next to me made a soft noise. I sat still for awhile. The heavy bag on my lap restricted the blood flow to my legs. I rationalized that if I sat there long enough, maybe she'd be sound asleep so I wouldn't wake her. I was wrong. Thousands of needle points raced through my legs before I finally wrestled the bag back to its resting place. Still the lady woke again, readjusting her self, pulling her legs up to her chest.

I took the opportunity to ready myself to join the sleeping passengers, hoping that I'd be able to sleep most of the remaining twelve hours to Sydney. It was then that I learned there is no such thing as deep sleep on a train. The constant stop and go, the cold temperatures, and the impossibility of comfort all played their part in keeping restless eyes from staying shut any length of time. Yet the lady next to me seemed to sleep so peacefully. How could the train be that comfortable to anyone? Instead of sleep, I anticipated what Sydney would be like. What would it be like to stay in a hostel? After all the horror stories I had heard about mites, thieves, and drunken roommates, I was more than a little worried about what awaited.

I gave up on sleep long before the sun returned to the sky. My neck ached from the many positions I had contorted it into throughout the night, finally settling on using the table that pulled out from the seat in front of me as a pillow. I tucked the tray away and watched the other passengers; most of them were in a state between sleep and waking. Their bodies stirred, but I imagined their minds struggled to hold onto dreams.

The lady next to me moved as well. Sometime throughout the night, she had pulled her hair into a loose ponytail. Stray locks of limp hair hung in her now opened eyes. She looked at me, to see if I was also awake. "Pardon me; can I just get past you?"

Her voice was soft like a mother speaking to a small child. I had to strain to listen for an accent. All I could tell for sure was that she wasn't American.

"Of course." I quickly moved my stuff and stood in the aisle. I was surprised by the force of the train as it threw me to the side. The lady went past me as she made her way to the front of the car. I sat down and watched as the occupied sign was illuminated with a red glow. The way the lady hid inside her baggy clothes, the timid, quiet way she moved, even her voice reminded me of a mouse. I wondered why she was so mouse-like. I hoped she had not been waiting long to use the bathroom.

Shortly she returned, again apologizing for making me move. The more she spoke, the more Australian she sounded. Her eyes were like those of a deer caught in headlights, uncertain of her next move. Hair lady left again, this time to the dining cart, and I got up to join Carrie for breakfast.

"Did you sleep?" Carrie dug in her book-bag for the sandwiches we had made before leaving our cabin.

"Maybe for a couple hours. How bout you?" Already our stay in Australia had been full of firsts for both of us. Our first flight, first train ride, first trip out of the U.S., and our first time traveling on our own.

"Yeah, I had both seats, so I stretched out, it was nice. Except I kept worrying that someone who was supposed to sit here would get on throughout the night."

"I wish I had been that lucky." I looked back at hair lady who had returned with a Styrofoam plate of eggs and toast topped with a slice of tomato.

Carrie and I ate our sandwiches as the sun began to paint the world in different shades of pink. The hills rolled away in mounds of green as I watched the cows gathered

beneath clumps of trees. The vegetation here was different than where we were staying on the beach. It was still rich and green, but looked vaguely like our Midwest home than the rainforest to which we had become accustomed. I scanned the fields for kangaroos, but everything passed so quickly. I gave up and settled for watching the sun turn the morning into day as it climbed over the tops of the trees. Everything looked wet from dew and a thin fog hung in the valleys as the train pushed forward.

“Do you know how much longer?” I looked down at Carrie’s watch.

“About three hours I think. Have you seen Sarah?”

“She was still sleeping last I saw.” Her assigned seat was just behind mine.

We both look back at Sarah whose head still rested against the window, eyes closed. I wondered how she did that, sleeping through all the commotion. I shook my head and turned back to Carrie. “Well, I guess I should go back to my seat and maybe try to get a little more sleep.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was going to do.” Carrie smiled as she looked at the seat I was currently occupying.

I sighed and returned to my spot next to the lady. She had finished her breakfast. The trash sat on the table pulled out in front of her. With her small frame, she was able to pull her knees up to her chest, the table still inches from her knees. She sat like this with a book. How long she had been on the train? I noticed she was almost done with the book she held in her hands. The cover showed a scantily clad woman clinging desperately to a muscular man with dark hair, a romance novel. I wondered if she had a husband or a lover. She looked too lonely to be in love.

I rested my head on the arm of the seat trying to gain a few precious hours of sleep, but my eyes did not close. Instead I found my journal and I wrote. I wrote about the sun on the hills, and the odd man talking to Sarah. I wrote about breakfast and about not being able to sleep. I wrote about Sydney, and how I was excited and nervous at the same time to reach our destination. I didn't mention the lady next to me. Three pages were full before I laid down my pen. My eyes drifted to the window over the lady's book. The land was flat now, small lakes surrounded the train. I sat watching the oyster farms pass finding it odd that the water level and ground level were equal. It reminded me of Swiss-cheese, the holes full of water. Did it flood when it rained? A few small boats glided along the water. Beyond the water there were more hills but very few signs of man-made life. The windows were full of deep greens and the dark blue of deep water.

Time passed as the land outside of the train passed underneath. The lady next to me sat quietly reading. Eventually the voice over the speaker announced Sydney Station as the next stop. The lady next to me was still reading. I wondered how many books she had read on the train. I wondered what she thought of me. Did she think I was just one of those silly Americans? Sarah, Carrie, and I gathered our belongings so we could be waiting at the doors when they opened. The lady and her book didn't move.

We left the train, but the lady stayed. We stepped back into the hustle of people, back into the open world. The lady continued to read. I wonder where she was going. I wonder how long she had been on the train, why she was traveling, why she was alone. I wondered if she was nervous about reaching her destination. Would I ever run into her again, and if I did, why hadn't I said "hello"? It occurred to me that everyone had a story

to tell. Why hadn't I given her a chance to tell hers? Had I been scared to talk to her just because she was Australian? Just as quickly the thought passed and I turned to the girls.

"So where to first?"

Kangaroos

Our seats were in the front of the car. My companion was a woman not much older than me with long dark hair. The train would be full tonight. I made note of a particularly rowdy bunch, two young mothers and half a dozen kids. The kids of course, were already running up and down the aisle.

"I'm glad I'm not sitting back there." The lady next to me motioned towards one of the mothers who sat in her bright pink spandex shorts that squeezed her legs, making the flesh bulge around the edges. A small child posed in her lap, a little girl, not a year old, with a lollipop-sticky, red face.

"Yeah, me too," I smiled in agreement.

"I'm Sarah."

"Melissa."

After introductions, the conversation quieted. We both sat with overhead lights on as she finished dinner and I finished my book.

"Are you on holiday?" she asked as she dug for her own book.

"Actually, I'm here for school. A study abroad program. But since we are here, we like to travel on the weekends."

"Really, where are you staying?"

"Lennox Head. It's a small town just south of Brisbane."

"Well, you're a ways away from your home away from home."

"Yeah, a 24 hour train ride to Melbourne."

“Melbourne is where I grew up. I haven’t been home in over a year. My sister is getting married.”

“Do you live in Sydney then?” I glanced out the window. It was that time of day, just before dark when the world appeared to be black and white. Only the brightest colors still held their hue. Everything else was painted in shades of grey.

“Actually, I spent the last year at sea. I’m in the Navy. We’re required to spend two years aboard a ship.”

“Is the Navy a four year commitment?”

“No, in Australia, it’s six.”

“I bet that is a neat experience though.”

“Yeah, I like it because I get to travel, but sometimes it gets frustrating being on a ship with a bunch of blokes. There aren’t many girls aboard.”

I had been on a similar ship earlier that day. Carrie, Sarah, and I decided to visit the Australian Maritime Museum during our eight hour lay over in Sydney. Carrie and I bought tickets to go on both the battle ship and the submarine. Just being on the ship made me feel claustrophobic, with the halls filled with fold-down beds and doorways we literally had to crawl through. I couldn’t imagine actually living on a ship.

It was getting difficult to hear one another over the noise in the back. The mothers were talking to each other. They were also getting drunk which meant the volume kept increasing. Their Australian accent was proportional with the noise level. As the noise increased, the accent grew thicker. Their language was peppered with colorful phrases. It made me feel sorry for the kids hanging on their ankles.

“Some people have no manners.” Sarah shook her head at the people behind us.

“Really, why would you get drunk on a train?”

“It makes it even better that their kids are with them.” They reminded me of the people commonly labeled as trailer trash at home. I wondered if Australians had their own version of trailer trash. What would they call them? Hippies?

Again our conversation was interrupted by a loud noise. This time it was a crash coming from the car behind us. It sounded as if someone or something had been pushed over violently.

“If you touch my son, I’ll kill you!” Our chins dropped as we looked around unsure of what to make of the situation. Several employees went hurrying past.

A few minutes ticked by before an announcement was made. The speaker crackled, “Due to circumstances, there will be an unplanned stop at the next station. Please remain on the train.” The train rolled to a stop shortly after. I looked down at my watch, 10:13 p.m. There were men in badges boarding the train now. Still, no one knew what was going on just behind us. Outside the train, the station seemed empty. There were a few stragglers standing underneath the fluorescent lights that lit the bathroom door with a harsh glow. In contrast to the stark pools of light, the rest of the world was black. It was a lonely, industrialized kind of darkness. The awning over us blocked any stars that might have been poking out of the clouds.

We sat for what seemed like forever before the train heaved itself back into motion. Everyone had been quiet trying to pick up on stray bits of conversation coming from the commotion.

The motion of the train seemed to jerk the drunken travelers back to life. The faster the wheels went, the faster their mouths went. The kids, previously restrained by their mothers returned to their game of flipping over the seats. I watched as a small boy with dirty blond hair and no shirt flipped over a chair, kicking an unsuspecting young man in the face. The boy righted himself then quickly retreated to his mother who hadn't noticed the incident.

I remembered in the States when a mother was reported to child protection agencies right in the middle of a grocery store. She had been doing her shopping with three young kids. The oldest of which was a boy that looked to be six or seven years old. The mother had turned her back on him, busy trying to quiet the toddler in the cart who had started screaming. The boy had seized the opportunity and had tried to climb a Coca Cola display. The boy, pulling himself up on a box that weighed half of what he did managed to pull the box over on top of himself. Both had come tumbling down to the ground. To me, it had looked like an accident. Another shopper had disagreed. I wondered what that shopper would do if she had been on this train. None of the Australian passengers seemed too worked up over the kids.

"Well, that was interesting." Sarah put her book away commenting on the unscheduled stop.

"I wonder what happened?"

An older woman with white hair and too much perfume piped up from the seat behind us. "This guy had too much to drink and started yelling at another man's son. When the boy didn't answer, he threatened him. That was when the father started yelling,

which we all heard.” She reminded me of the stereotypical gossipy neighbor always watching out the kitchen window. How did she know what happened?

The train sped on. Eventually the car grew quiet. The alcohol must have taken effect on the spandex girls, even they had fallen silent. My eyes began to grow heavy as I let sleep overtake me.

The next thing I knew, the sun was rising. The city environment I had become accustomed to while traveling had been traded in for soft rolling hills and herds of cattle.

“I know it’s kind of foggy, but if you watch, you might see kangaroos.” Until she spoke, I hadn’t realized she was awake. “They come out in the morning before the sun gets too hot.”

I focused my eyes on the passing scenery, excited about seeing my first kangaroo in the wild. Outside, the world looked wet. A dense fog hung in the air over the green pastures. It looked like the kind of fog that you could smell; the kind that you could inhale deeply and hold it in your lungs.

“There! Did you see them?” Sarah pointed at a small bunch of trees that just passed our window.

“No.” I looked back hoping to catch a glimpse. The trees reminded me of giant bonsai trees. Not much taller than a large bush, in the sun it would provide only scattered shade.

“You have to be quick. Next time I’ll try to point them out earlier.”

A minute passed before Sarah spoke again. “Okay, watch as we come up on these trees. There are three there. Can you see them?”

I could sort of make out brown shapes standing beneath the branches. “I think so.”

She smiled, but I wasn’t content. I wanted to really see a kangaroo. I watched the window, concentrating. “There!” I pointed over excitedly at a single kangaroo standing beneath a tree. It stood not much over four feet. It looked at the train as if assessing us for danger. Its long tail resting on the ground behind him.

“Good, you’re getting it.” They’re a real nuisance you know. I’ve never heard of trains having problems with them, but drivers hit them all the time, especially at dawn and dusk.

“They seem like they are the equivalent to our deer.”

“Do you have problems with them on roads?”

“Yeah, and they can do a lot of damage.”

“So can a kangaroo. You have another animal we don’t have. Kind of like a koala.”

“Yep, the raccoon.”

“I’ve heard about them, but I’ve never seen one. I’d like to.” Through the window, I could see the sun was quickly burning away the fog. The kangaroos, as well as much of the Australian wildlife, would soon be taking shelter from the heat.

“They’re fun curious little animals. They get into everything.”

“I’ve heard they are smart little buggers.”

“Very. My mother had them as pets. They learn to pick locks and everything.”

“Not like the koalas. They don’t do much more than sleep and eat, but on the ground they can move fast.”

“Really?” Talking to Sarah was fun. It seemed there was so much I could learn from her about her country. The kind of stuff you couldn’t learn from the text books.

“Yeah, when they are being chased by cows they can move.”

“Cows?”

“Uh huh, cows hate koalas. I’ve seen cows chase a koala up a tree then circle the tree for hours waiting on the koala to come back down.”

“That’s so weird. I wonder why. It’s not like they are native to the same country.” I laughed out loud at the image I had conjured in my head. A sleeping koala tucked into a forked branch while a cow makes its rounds underneath chewing her cud and wearing a dirt ring around the trunk.

Sarah looked amused at my amazement. She smiled as she talked. “I don’t know, but they hate them. I miss the farm. I remember in the mornings you would see herds of kangaroos bounding across the pasture. Tons of them. It was neat to watch, but at the same time kind of scary.”

I pictured the bounding kangaroos in my head. I could see them coming over a hill and through the mist. Just like a movie.

The train rolled on until houses came into view again. It was already 7a.m., and we were far from our destination. Originally, the train had been scheduled to arrive at 7:15 which would have given us just enough time to make our next bus.

“Thanks to that nice stop, we are definitely going to be late.” Sarah nodded her head in the direction of my watch.

“Yeah, my friends and I are supposed to catch a bus at 8:30.”

“Where are you going?”

“To The Great Ocean Road, but we have no idea how to get to the bus.”

“Do you have a map? Maybe I could help. I live outside of the city, but we can figure it out.”

“I think Carrie does, I’ll go find her.”

Carrie and I returned with the map to see if we could figure out the best route possible, or even just figure out a general direction in which to run once we had gotten off the train.

“Well, this isn’t the part of Melbourne I know, but it looks like when you get out of the train you need to go this way.” Sarah pointed towards our destination on the map. “Looks like it is going to be a little bit of a walk though.” Carrie and I exchanged nervous looks. Our tickets were non-refundable.

“Great.” I looked at my watch, 7:45. The train seemed to move even slower as we were waiting for Melbourne to come into sight. 8:00 and we still weren’t there.

Five minutes later, the speaker system cracked, “Passengers departing at Melbourne should gather their luggage and be ready to exit the train. As always, thank you for traveling with us, and please mind the gap.”

“Thanks for being such a great traveling companion. It was nice getting to know you.” Sarah smiled. “I’m certainly glad I wasn’t sitting back there.” She looked in the direction of the spandex women.

“Yeah, it’s been fun.” I agreed with an understanding smile.

“Good luck catching that bus.”

I glanced at my watch. 8:13. “Yeah, I think we are going to need it. Have fun at your wedding.” Sarah had been such an interesting person to travel with. Saying goodbye felt awkward, as if a simple goodbye wasn’t enough.

“You can make it. I have faith in you.” These were the last words Sarah said to me. As she spoke them the doors opened and the train was gone.

The Kindness of a Stranger

He singled me out in a crowd. It was dark. People were pushing and shuffling their feet down the platform. The train was running late, everyone was impatient to board. “Well, hello there.” He waved to me as if he was greeting an old friend. He picked up his bag and came closer. “Are you guys waiting on the train to Sydney?”

“Sorta, we’re really going all the way to Brisbane.” Sarah answered. After a weekend in Melbourne, it was already time to return home.

“But we will be traveling on the same train.” He smiled in my direction. It was then that I recognized him. He had been the creepy man on our tour bus the day before. “Do you think it’s a coincidence, or maybe fate that our paths cross again?”

“Yeah, that is weird.” Sarah moved further away.

The man was at least twice our age, and definitely not Australian. His pot-belly and polo shirt displayed his tourist status. “Brisbane? That’s a long ride. Why don’t you guys fly?”

“Poor college students. The train is much cheaper.” The man moved closer. Too close. The girls backed away, leaving me to handle the scary old man alone.

“What car will you be in?”

“We’ll be in H.” I kicked myself as soon as the letter escaped my mouth. Why had I told him where to find me?

“Another coincidence, I’m in G. I’ll be right in front of you. Maybe I’ll come visit.”

I smiled in response. This man made me uncomfortable. His mannerisms felt slimy, like a politician trying to win votes for all the wrong reasons.

“Are you here on holiday?” The man moved closer, his gray hair looked dead in the overhead light.

“No, school.” I looked behind me hoping that Sarah and Carrie would come to my rescue. I glanced down at my watch. “I suppose we should go wait over there for the train.” I pointed to the section designated for our car.

“Well, when we get on, let me buy you a drink to celebrate our meeting again.” My eyes must have shown my disbelief when I looked back at him. “That is of course if you don’t object.” He looked at me and smiled.

I felt a hand on my arm and turned to find Sarah. She pulled me away before I had to answer the creepy old man.

“Guys, why me? What am I going to do?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like him.” Carrie looked uneasily over her shoulder. “I didn’t like him on the bus. Did you notice the way he was looking at the women?” On the bus he had given up his seat to another couple so he could sit by a little blonde thing. He followed her around all day. By the end of the day he couldn’t keep his hands to himself.

“You could hide in the bathroom. We’ll come get you when he’s gone.” Sarah smiled at me.

The three of us took our seats. Carrie and Sarah sat across the aisle from me. I sat down next to an older woman and pulled out my journal. There was so much to write.

“Writing about your travels?” The lady next to me adjusted her belongings.

“Yeah, I don’t want to forget anything. So I try to write every day.”

“Where are you from?”

“United States.”

I watched as the old lady recoiled a bit before speaking again. “Oh, is it scary there?”

I found myself trying not to laugh as I attempted to explain to her what it’s like to live in America, “The U.S. has its good and its bad. Really, all you see in the news is the bad. It is very different depending on where you live in the States. The more known places like California and New York can be scarier than where I’m from.”

“Do you find the people here nice?”

“Oh yes, I’ve met many interesting people and they are all very welcoming.”

The lady got quiet for a moment, as if she was contemplating her next words. “I don’t know, all those people, I think I’d be scared to live there.” Apparently I hadn’t put her fears at ease.

Our conversation was interrupted by the man from the tour. “Are you busy?” he looked down at my open journal, pen in hand. The way he stood over me reminded me of a stalker watching from a distance, always knowing exactly what you are doing.

“Yeah, I kind of need to get this written.” I was too afraid to make eye contact. What sane man would want to have a drink with a girl half his age, and on a train at that? I ran my right hand over my left arm trying to brush away the crawly feeling that suddenly surfaced.

“Well, I’ll come back later then.” He turned and walked back through the door, taking the weight on my shoulders with him.

“You know that man?” The lady next to me looked at me confused.

“Not exactly. We went on a tour yesterday and he was in the bus, and now he wants to have a drink with me. I just can’t figure out how to get him to go away.”

“Next time he comes back, if you want me to tell him to leave, just let me know. It’s not right that a man his age wants to have a drink with a young girl. No, there is something wrong with him.”

I smiled a thank you as I put my journal back into my bookbag. It was weird to have someone become instantly protective of me, and yet it also left me feeling reassured.

“I’m going to Sydney to take care of my horses. My husband and I show horses in the fair. I wasn’t going to go this year, traveling alone is so hard on me, but one of the horses is sick and they need me. Ever since my husband died, it’s hard to do everything alone.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I was taken aback by how trusting this lady seemed to be. She didn’t even know me.

“I used to live in this area. My friends lived right over that hill.” She pointed at a neighborhood out the window. “They’re dead now too. Did you enjoy your stay in Melbourne?”

“Greatly, but it was too short.” I was surprised by her abrupt change of subject. “We really only had one day to explore. It’s beautiful though.” The city had reminded me of what I had imagined London to be like. The little alleys were lined with cafés and charming shops. The brick streets, the river, the art museum, the gardens - it truly was a wonderful city.

“It’s too bad you weren’t here last weekend. That is when they did the parade. Many years ago I met some Americans who were attending the parade. We shared a cab. They were very nice. We spent the entire day together, and actually two of them ended up getting married. They sent me an invitation to their wedding. We’ve kept in touch ever since.”

“Aww, that’s sweet.” The city lights were quickly falling behind us as the train continued towards Sydney. Travelers always told stories of the natives they met who welcomed them into their homes and made their trip unforgettable. Until now, I had thought they were just stories.

“Yeah, I imagine they were doing the same thing you are, traveling the country, but I think they met here. I invited them out to my farm. It’s in the mountains and we have horses.”

“I bet they liked that. I know I would.” I imagined staying with this woman would be like visiting a relative. She seemed the type that would be throwing food at you as soon as you walked in the door.

“When do you leave?” She smiled softly. There was a genuine friendliness about her.

“Three weeks from now actually. I can’t believe three months have gone by so quickly.”

“It’s a shame I didn’t meet you sooner. You and your friends could have come and spent some time on the farm. See what the country is really like.” She pulled out her dinner, a sandwich of some kind. It had white gooey stuff on the bread.

I suddenly regretted the fact that I hadn't met her earlier, or other natives for that matter. Her offer made me aware of all the wonderful people and adventures I had missed.

"We went on a tour of the Great Ocean Road yesterday. It was amazing. Seeing the 12 Apostles gave me goose-bumps." In my mind I could still see the giant stone structures standing there as if they were guarding the shore from invasion. From where we had stood on the observation deck, we could see seven of the twelve rock structures. Each had a personality of its own, carved by the constantly moving water. The morning had been hazy, which added to the majestic feeling these huge masses of rock jutting from the water radiated.

"Oh really, the farm is out that way."

"Yes, it was beautiful."

The lady sighed. "I guess when you live in a place, you start to take it for granted. They just seem like a bunch of rocks to me."

I rested my head on the tray in front of me, hoping that if the scary guy came back he'd think I was asleep, or better yet, that he wouldn't come back at all. It was scary being in a foreign country and being pursued by a strange man. I had no idea what would happen if something went wrong. The lady next to me sat quietly while Carrie and Sarah both settled into their books. My thoughts drifted back to home. The cornfields of the Midwest, miles of flat, symmetrical rows of corn, the trees, the streams - was I taking these things for granted?

My stomach started growling loudly enough that I couldn't ignore it any longer. I sat up to see that Carrie and Sarah had the same thought on their minds. They were

digging out the peanut butter and jelly as I watched. Making a sandwich on a moving train with less than adequate materials is not an easy task. A few plastic sporks and two very sticky hands later, I had managed to create a holey sandwich.

“Well that’s a very clever idea.”

I jumped. I had been concentrating so hard on my sandwich I had forgotten that other people were around. “Yeah, I laughed. Peanut butter and jelly is our staple.”

“It’s a good idea to put them together. I never thought of that.”

“Really? It’s very popular in America. Sometimes it is all the kids will eat.”

“And it’s so simple.”

“Would you like to try one?”

“No, I never keep that stuff in the house.” The lady pointed at the jar of peanut butter. If I did, I’d eat it all.” I could picture her buying a jar of peanut butter on a special occasion as a treat for her grandchildren. I smiled at the image in my mind. She would be the type to spoil her grandkids.

I sat back to eat my sandwich, thinking how funny it is that something that is such an ingrained part of our culture is unheard of in another.

A finger poked me and I turned hoping not to meet the face of the older guy. Carrie smiled at me. “Sorry. Just wanted to tell you your friend came back. He looked at you. I guess he thought you were sleeping because he walked away.”

“Yay!” I smiled at her news. “Now as long as he stays gone.”

It was about that time that the lights in the car dimmed. “Guess that means it’s bed time.” Sarah said, packing her book away. The darkness in the train felt different than it had in the past. This time it had felt warm, almost friendly.

The sun came up as the sleepy passengers roused. I woke a little surprised to find I had slept so well. Maybe it was the protectiveness of my new friend that had put me at ease. Just as I was contemplating this, she returned to our seat with her breakfast in hand. "I saw your friend this morning."

"Great." I stood up to let her pass, wondering if he'd find his way back to our car seeing as how the food car was positioned directly behind us.

"He's old enough to be your father. He has no business wanting to drink with a girl your age."

"Thanks." I smiled and sat back down next to the woman. There was something about her that reminded me of my own grandmother. I was sorry that the train ride was almost over.

"How old are you anyway?"

"Just turned 22."

"Oh, you look much younger." It was common for Australians to think we were younger than we actually were. I think maybe it had something to do with the sun damage the natives endured. They didn't look old by any means, their skin just showed more wear and tear, especially the Aussies we met along the coast. For many, the beach was a daily part of life. "I thought you were the same age as my granddaughter." The lady enjoyed her breakfast as she told me about the coming-out ball they just had for her granddaughter.

Shortly after, the train rolled into Sydney. "This is my stop." The lady reached below her to gather her belongings. "Thanks for being such a good bed mate." She smiled in a way that made me want to hug her goodbye. Instead, I smiled back.

I watched her from the window of the train, sad to see her go. In the short time we had known each other, this lady had made me feel more at ease than any other time since setting foot in Australia. I wished I had more time to get to know her. The train pulled away and I waved goodbye, thinking how weird it was to be so far from home, and yet the kindness of one stranger had given me the same feeling as walking through my own front door.

Tim

I watched out the window as the mountains melted into suburbs. We had spent the day in Katoomba, and we were now on our way back to Sydney to catch a show at the Opera House, a perfect way to finish off my birthday celebration. As the train moved, my eyes weren't focused on anything in particular. The houses and tall concrete buildings surrounded by small patches of grass and the streets and sidewalks of city living passed before my eyes. My mind was trying to hold onto the image of the sun rising over the Three Sisters. The Three Sisters were mountain peaks that stood out from the others. There was an aboriginal dreamtime legend that said there were three beautiful giant sisters in the Katoomba tribe. These sisters were in love with three brothers from another tribe but marriage was forbidden. The brothers, being warriors, decided to take the sisters by force. A witchdoctor turned the sisters into stone to protect them; however, he was killed in the battle and no one has been able to break the spell since.

We had woken up at 4 a.m. just to make our way to Echo Point. It was there that we had watched the sun paint the valleys, setting one side of the mountain into an orange and pink fire while the other remained in shadows. It was one of those moments that I wanted to hold onto forever.

Over the speaker a voice crackled, "Due to unavoidable circumstances passengers traveling to Sydney will need to board at gate 7 in . . ."

The name of the station was buried in static. Wait. What? Was that for us? In my mind I replayed what I heard trying to make sense of it before I turned to Sarah. "Did you hear any of that?"

“I think we have to change trains, but I couldn’t tell where.”

“Awesome, so what are we going to do?” I searched the other passengers on the train looking for any other travelers who appeared stressed from the situation. My eyes fell on two guys about our age. They had seated themselves in the front of the car so that they were facing us. One had the long wavy blonde hair popular with the surfers. The other wore his brown hair short. Both had friendly smiles.

I nudged Sarah motioning towards them. “So, do you think they’re gay?”

“They are sitting very close. Hey look, there is a map behind them. I’m going to go see if I can figure out where we are supposed to go.” Sarah got up to study the map.

A few minutes later she returned to her seat. “Hey, those guys up there are going to Sydney. They said we can just follow them.”

I smiled at her then looked towards our volunteer tour guides. They were lost in their own conversation, but at least I didn’t have to worry about getting lost somewhere between the Blue Mountains and Sydney.

A few more stops and our newest acquaintances started to gather their belongings. With a glance back our way, they made sure we saw that it was time to get off the train. So we followed suit, gathering our luggage. The masses on the train also began to gather their belongings. My oversized duffle bag felt as if it had grown arms and legs. In the crowd it was continuously stuck on something. Squeezing between seats, bags, and passengers I eventually pushed my luggage out the door of the train.

On the platform, my group was gathering around the guys who had offered us their assistance. I stood next to the short haired guy as we waited for the rest of our group, there were eight of us this time. I was surprised by the crowds of scurrying people.

It wasn't dark yet, but night was approaching. What were all these people doing on the train? This was the most people I'd seen in one place since we had pushed our way through the airports in Los Angeles back home.

"I'm Tim." The guy next to me offered his hand.

"Hi, I'm Melissa." I smiled as we shook hands.

"So, where are you girls from?"

"The United States."

"Wow, you're a ways from home, are you all traveling together?"

"Well we are here with school. We're studying in Lennox Head. We're just out exploring this weekend."

The last member of our group joined and we started to make our way up the stairs and over the ramp to the platform of our next train. By the time we got there people were standing shoulder to shoulder with no room to move. I found myself standing next to Tim alone. I wasn't sure where the rest of my group had gotten off to.

"We really aren't that far away, I promise." Tim looked at my bag sympathetically. "So what part of the States are you from?"

"Do you know Indiana?" I asked not really expecting him to know. Hollywood and New York seemed to be the only places that Australians were familiar with.

"No, I don't know many of the states."

"Well, do you know Chicago?"

"I've heard of it. Near the lakes?"

"Yeah. Indiana is in that general area. It's one of the landlocked states towards the middle."

The train hadn't been in motion five minutes when the speakers crackled again.

"Passengers going to Sydney will need to transfer trains. You will board at platform 4 at Parramatta. I looked at Tim. My eyes must have shown the disbelief that I felt.

"Guess that means we get to change trains again. It's not normally like this, I promise. It's because of all the strikes." The train slowed again. "Well, this is us."

The train emptied again. This time the passengers poured themselves into an even smaller train car. Tim and I stood face to face, almost touching. "Really, we could walk there faster than this." He looked down at his feet. We were both straddling my duffle bag. The people in front of us, frustrated with the delays had decided that smoking on the train was the solution. Three travelers with dark skin and curly black hair stood there puffing away. As the intensity of the smoke became thicker in the car, the temperature also began to rise.

"You know, I'm going to the states soon. I'm saving up money now."

"Really? Where are you going?"

"California."

"That's a long way from Indiana. Any particular reason or just because?"

Outside, daylight was quickly fading.

"Well, it's because of a girl." He too looked out the window as a pink glow painted his cheeks.

"Aww, where did you meet her?" Well that answered my question - he definitely wasn't gay. I was almost jealous of this girl that had found a guy willing to travel halfway around the world for her.

"I met her on the Internet." He turned towards me a little boy grin on his face.

"I'm just going to meet her, and if things don't work out, then I can spend my time traveling."

"Sounds like a plan."

It was as if the setting sun also took with it the train's momentum. As the sky grew darker, the train slowed. Soon it had come to a complete stop.

"Great. If I had known it was going to take this long I would have found a ride."

I looked at him, trying to figure out what was going on with the train.

"Seriously, you have no idea how close we are. I can see Sydney station up ahead." He was at the window looking down the track.

Once the other passengers realized the train had come to a stop, the noise level began to grow. Everyone started complaining, yelling in frustration at the conductor. One man pounded on the door of the train "Just let us out!" The plea became a chorus as other passengers joined the disgruntled man.

"Let us out of here!" A woman cried.

The door connecting our car to the one in front opened. A brave employee stuck her head through the door. "I'm sorry, there is nothing we can do. The tracks in front of us are out."

"Can't you just open the doors?" the frustrated man growled.

"There is nothing I can do." The woman turned and shut the door behind her, leaving the upset passengers to deal with the situation alone. The noise continued to grow as the trapped travelers grew more desperate. Tim and I were pushed closer together as the crowd jostled around us.

The door opened again. This time a male poked his head through. "I'm sorry, you are just going to have to be patient. Do you think we like this anymore than you do?"

"Can't you just open the door so we can get off the train?" One of the men with the cigarettes pleaded with the conductor.

"I'll see what I can do." The conductor turned and left the car. A minute later the doors opened. People burst out of the train like air out of a balloon whose walls have been stretched too thin. Seats emptied and Tim and I sat down next to one another. The vinyl of the seats was so hot it automatically glued itself to the backs of my legs.

"I wonder how long this is going to take?" Tim looked down at his watch. "I hope I'm not late you know, I'd almost get off and walk, but this is where all those riots happened last week. Did you hear about that?"

"Yeah, with all the Aborigines. It happened here?"

"Yeah, it's not exactly the best part of town."

"Do you live in Sydney?"

"No, I live in the mountains. My friend and I were coming into the city to go to a wine tasting party." There was something almost teasing about his smile. "I'm not a big fan of wine, but you know it's free food and free alcohol." He flashed his little boy smile again.

"The mountains were beautiful. Do you like living there?"

"They are beautiful. Plus it's much cheaper than living in the city, and with the train, normally I can come back and forth whenever I want to. So yeah, it's nice. Kind of the best of both worlds."

"Normally you can go back and forth." I stuck my tongue out at him playfully.

"This is a great way to spend my birthday, huh?"

"It's your birthday? Well happy birthday. How old are you?"

"Just turned 22. It's kind of depressing really. I'm not ready to grow up. I wanted to stay 21 forever."

"No, don't be depressed. There are so many great things ahead of you yet."

I looked at the seat in front of me as I played with a stray string that had gotten loose from the stitching. "Yeah, a lot more responsibilities and commitments."

"Maybe so, but with all those things life just gets richer, more meaningful."

I smiled at him. "That's a good way to look at life."

"So, how are you celebrating your birthday?"

"Actually we are on our way to see a play at the Opera House. We also spent the night in Katoomba, and woke up early to watch the sunrise. Once the sun was up, we went on a bushwalk through the mountains. It's been a great day so far."

"That's awesome. I'm sorry you're stuck in this now."

"I'm not, I think it's funny. This would happen to me on my birthday. That's just my luck."

"I'm glad you can have such a positive outlook. That's important."

The train lurched forward unexpectedly. Our eyes met. I was both excited to get off the train and a little sorry that I would have to say goodbye to Tim. Judging by the way the corner of his mouth turned up, he felt the same way too.

"Well, have fun at your wine tasting."

"Yeah, it should be a good time. I hope you have a wonderful birthday, Melissa."

“I’ve really enjoyed talking with you.”

“Who knows, maybe our paths will cross again, but remember, there are lots of good things to come.”

The train slowed to a stop. We exited together, walking out onto the platform. Tim met up with his friend, and I watched as the two walked off to the opposite end of the station. For a short moment, I wished I was going with him. I felt something close to loneliness as I walked in the opposite direction. Soon I would return to my home on the other side of the globe and Tim would be just a memory. Still I held onto the hope that someday our paths would cross again.

The Horizon

It was dark when we boarded. The moonless night was quiet, almost sleepy. The temperature was dropping slowly, a cool breeze wrapped around our legs and through our hair as we stepped into the darkness for the last time. After our last weekend trip to Sydney, we were heading home to Lennox Head. Our time abroad was quickly coming to an end. The train was full of its usual mix. The mothers with crying children, an occasional older couple sharing a pillow, the strung out hippie with hair that hadn't been washed in months and a patched jacket that had probably been laundered even less frequently, and the solitary figure traveling alone dotted the seats of the car.

The air inside felt stale, re-circulated. It was just a few degrees cooler inside the train than it had been outside the station. I took my seat, alone for now. Nice, there would be room to stretch out, room to sleep. I had never experienced that in a night train. I dug my pillow from my bag and tried to get comfortable. Naturally, the bench fell three inches shy of comfort. I propped my pillow on the window and stretched my legs out, hoping to find sleep.

Sleep didn't come. Instead my mind wandered, drifting through the days I'd spent in Australia. I remembered the quiet mornings I'd spent alone on the beach. The sun rising from the depths of the water, casting the world in gold matched only by the soft white sand stretching for miles in both directions. On these mornings I'd walk with a sea hawk. He'd be waiting for me as I made my way through the brush. Perched atop a tall post, he'd sit motionless as I came through the clearing. He'd sit, following me only with his eyes as I passed him. Later, my feet in the wet sand, water swirling around my

ankles, he'd join me. Swooping into the ocean just feet away, snatching that days breakfast from the waves.

My right leg tingled. There was a baby crying just in front of me. I felt sorry for the mother as she tried to console her child. It couldn't imagine having a train full of people irritated at you because of a fussy child. The child cried itself to sleep and I closed my eyes.

Still my mind wandered. I remembered the boat and the endless ocean, the jewel tones of the Great Barrier Reef. The reef was a world of its own with deep valleys and endless color. Snorkeling away from the boat, I swam over an enormous fish. He was just a head shorter than me. It was funny, the docile manner he rolled to his side watching me swim over, an arm's length away. I swam with a sea turtle that day, and held a giant rubbery starfish. The Fisher Price blue starfish was larger than my hand, its legs spilling back into the water. I couldn't believe my journey was coming to an end.

The hum of the train turned into the hum of city streets in my mind. The city lights of Sydney, the towering buildings draped in decorative architecture of carved stone, gargoyles protecting the tallest peaks. The Sydney Opera House stands out majestically over the water; the Harbor Bridge, a watercolor back drop, too picturesque to be true. It was real though, and I was there.

The train stopped and people poured through the doors. A man, smelling strongly of alcohol, took his place next to me. My nose wrinkled involuntarily, but he did not notice. He stared straight ahead, his eyes burning holes into the seat in front of him. I wondered who he was and what he was seeing. It was apparent that he wanted to be

anywhere but on this train. There was an emptiness about him, as if his mind traveled separately and his body was a shell.

I sat, staring out the window into the blackness. The world was so dark I couldn't see anything except the occasional streaks of light as another train passed us going the opposite direction. Suddenly the world would get darker as the train entered a tunnel. Everything felt eerily sealed from civilization. Then the light would emerge again. I hadn't known so many types of darkness existed. I felt as if I was watching the nothingness that the man beside me studied in the back of the chair.

My eyes were growing heavy, but my nerves were tense. A strange uneasiness settled like a ball of energy around our seats, angry energy seeping from this man. The rest of the train slept on, unaware. My stomach had been tied in knots, a feeling I hadn't known for three months. The day we boarded the plane was the last time I'd remembered feeling like this. It had been my first time flying. It was also the first snow storm of the season. They de-iced the plane three times before it left the ground. Thirty-six hours later, I was half way around the world. My stomach had been in a continuous knot then. I couldn't believe I had chosen to travel so far from everything I knew.

At the next stop the seat behind us emptied and the man next to me moved. He got up as silently as he had sat down and moved to the empty seat. I sighed, relieved as I finally let my eyes close.

But the man did not leave me, not really. I could feel his eyes in the back of my head, staring. That angry glare felt as if it could stare right through me. How could any one seem so hurt? So lost?

I remembered stepping off the plane when I first arrived in this country. I had felt lost then, walking into a new world. My sweater clung to me as I stepped into the humidity. The palm trees, lining the walkway, looked alien. I didn't know what I was going to do in this country for three months. We had flown into Brisbane, Queensland. The camp where we would be staying was in Lennox Head, New South Wales. I had kept to myself the entire three hours of the bus ride to NSW. Bob the bus driver had regaled us with lively tales of deadly spiders and venomous snakes. Meanwhile, the only thought that had been going through my mind was what had I gotten myself into. Snakes and airplanes were my biggest fears, and here I had jumped head first into both of them.

Now looking back, home would never be the same. Everything seemed so dull compared to the adventure I had been living. I remembered the night clubs, the pubs, white water rafting. I thought of climbing the waterfalls, hiking through the rainforest, crossing crocodile infested waters at night. It was all coming to an end.

"Excuse me miss." I felt a tap at my shoulder and looked up into the face of the conductor. "This man was sitting in someone else's seat."

The angry man returned to his spot next to me. The conductor leaned over to whisper quietly enough that only the angry man and I could hear. "Don't worry, miss, he will be getting off a few stops from now."

I smiled at the conductor, not sure what the proper response to such a comment would be. I wasn't sure one actually existed. In Australia, it was acceptable to look on the subculture as less than human. The alcoholics, the hippies, they contributed little to society in the view of the upper class. From what I saw, however, they made up the culture that gave Australia its appeal. People all over the world want to visit Australia for

its beer or for its relaxed, slow-paced lifestyle. There was something enchanting about the laid-back nature of the people, something that I wanted to take home with me.

The man's chest would rise and fall mechanically, but no other muscles moved. Once I thought I saw him twitch, but even then, I wondered if it was just a shadow. Half an hour later the man did leave. He got up, taking only the clothes on his back and stepped into the night, leaving me and the sleeping passengers to be on our way without him.

I wondered if he had a family that was waiting on him. I would be seeing my own family soon. I smiled at the thought. It had been three months, the longest I'd ever been separated from them. I was excited to get home. At the same time, it was hard to see things come to an end. Hard to say goodbye to all the places, adventures, and people that I had met. As the train sped away, I wondered if I'd ever see Sydney again. I wondered if there would come a day in the future that I would find myself stretched out on the white sand of the Seven Mile Beach again.

Outside the window, the pinkish-orange of the early sun was starting to peak over the horizon. The lines that separated day and night were stark, the midnight blue sky rested on top of the glow of day, as if it were a stage curtain being raised. I had changed since I first set foot in this country. I remembered my first train ride, and the woman to which I was afraid to talk. If she had been sitting next to me now, I would have asked her where she was going, or maybe even her name. I had found a new desire to travel, to see the world. I was ready to experience life and all it had to offer. I wanted to make every day a new adventure.

The train slowed and the conductor announced that our journey was quickly coming to an end. The night train was fast approaching day. Carrie, Sarah, and I gathered our belongings for the last time as we stood at the door waiting. We watched intently, my mind anticipating what lay ahead. Mechanically, the door slowly opened. I stepped onto the platform. Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I looked around. The curtain had been lifted.